

Small Easter

By [Joanna Harader](#)

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A few years ago I audited a class called Preaching and the Short Story. There was a story on the syllabus with Easter in the title, and I kept thinking I should read that before I wrote my Easter sermon.

So this story title, “Small Easter,” kept rattling around in my brain. I’ve got to read “Small Easter,” I would tell myself. Maybe tonight I’ll have time to read Updike’s “Small Easter,” I would think. Small Easter, small Easter, small Easter.

And finally, I sat down to read the story. And it wasn’t “Small Easter” at all. It was “Short Easter.”

The thing is, that year, I felt like I was having a small Easter. And we’re not *supposed* to have small Easters. Ever. Because Easter is big. Theologically speaking, probably the biggest day of the Christian year. We have an extra worship service, a brunch, flowers, special music, and a room full of people worshiping. Easter is big! Huge!

Except when it’s small. A small Easter.

Easter felt small for me that year because on Maundy Thursday a beloved church member had broken her leg, and as they prepared for her surgery the doctors discovered that her cancer was back with a vengeance. That year I had a big Good Friday. And Easter felt pretty small.

That’s not how we want it, of course. We orchestrate the worship calendar so that we can experience a small Good Friday and a big Easter. But life doesn’t always mirror the emphases of church. For so many people, for so many reasons, Good Friday still looms large even as we sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!”

It was a big Good Friday that year. And a small Easter.

And in hearing and reading the Easter story from John, I realize that many people have had small Easters—even on that first miraculous, world-changing Sunday

morning.

Mary's Easter began as just an agonizing extension of Good Friday. Her weeping continues there by the tomb in the darkness. Then she notices, the stone is rolled away. The body of her beloved teacher must be gone, stolen, desecrated. Running—and still weeping—she takes the news to the disciples.

Peter and the “other disciple” literally race to the tomb, the other disciple getting there first, Peter being the first to go in. They see that Jesus' body is indeed gone. They see that the grave clothes are in a pile, with the head covering rolled up, set aside. We are told the other disciple sees and believes. But we don't know what he believes.

Whatever he believes, it doesn't lead to any big, dramatic scene. The disciple and Peter simply go home. Rather anti-climactic. Not the actions of men who have grasped the full meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not the actions of men who are experiencing a big Easter.

And what about the other disciples? What about Jesus' mother and brothers and aunt? What about Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea? What about all of the people who sang hopeful “Hosannahs” on Palm Sunday?

Many of these people had very small Easters indeed. Nobody logged onto Facebook to see Mary Magdalene's status update: “Talked to the Risen Lord this morning by his tomb!” There were no Twitter feeds. Not even a good old fashioned phone tree. Many of the people who had grieved so deeply on Friday do not hear the news of the resurrection on Sunday. Or Monday. Or Tuesday. For many of them it was likely weeks, maybe months before the trickles of rumors hit them. “They say that Jesus rose from the dead.” “I heard the disciples took his body.” “I heard it was the guards.”

Eventually, people come to hear the full story. To make some sense of it—at least as much sense as can be made of it. Eventually, a new, redeemed, community forms among those who believe in the Risen Christ. Truth is proclaimed. Social boundaries are broken down. The fear of death is swallowed up in the knowledge of God's vast and all-consuming love for us.

Eventually.

But not that morning.

That morning, it was a small Easter. Maybe not for Jesus. Maybe not for Mary. But for most people.

Easter may start small, because Good Friday can be so big. When we know of the evils people can do to each other; when we read of the violence running rampant in the world; when words of ignorance and hatred receive loud applause; when we witness the ravages of disease on the body of a dearly beloved, or feel the disease within our own flesh; when fear of death, of loss, of a shattered life grips at our gut and twists and twists . . . Good Friday can be big. Death's shadow is ever present, and at times overwhelming.

Sometimes Good Friday is so big that Easter has to start small.

It may take a while Easter to sink deep, deep into the fertile, broken up soil of our hearts. It may take a while to see the resurrection promise begin to grow, and bud, and bloom. It may take a while for us, as it did for Jesus' first disciples, to dry our tears and open our eyes to the truth that this resurrection promise is not about a life of worldly success or military victory. Not about an end to all of the things we don't like about life on this earth. Not a return to a better, happier time when we were in perfect health, when our children behaved, when our loved one was still alive.

The resurrection promise is not about things being the way we want them to be. That would make for a very small Easter indeed.

The resurrection promise is about the deep reality of holy life, even in the midst of violence, sickness, and death. The resurrection promise is about God's reckless love for us, and our ability, by God's grace, to live out that reckless love towards other people. The resurrection promise is an admonishment to not hold onto Jesus—to the life we think we want, the way we think we want things to be—but to move forward, proclaiming good news, trusting God for the fullness of life that awaits us in this world and the next.

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